



Cuba's communist congress

The start of a long, slow goodbye

Age has at last caught up with the Castros and their revolution. New ideas are emerging slightly faster than new leaders

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WHEN serious illness forced him to hand over power in 2006, Fidel Castro had been running things for almost half a century. This included an incident when, needing a knee operation, he contrived to have an epidural so that he could remain conscious and therefore in charge. Under Fidel, term-limits seemed less likely in the Plaza de la Revolución than in, say, Buckingham Palace.

But on April 16th Raúl Castro, who formally took over as president from his older brother in 2008, broke with tradition. Speaking at the opening of a four-day Congress of the ruling Communist Party, he declared that senior officials, including himself, should be limited to two consecutive five-year terms in office. "It's really embarrassing that we have not solved this problem in more than half a century," Raúl, who is aged 79, said. As the generation that led the revolution of 1959 has grown old in office, Cuba has lacked "a reserve of well-trained replacements with sufficient experience and maturity," he admitted.

But the Congress largely failed to put Mr Castro's words into practice. He was duly elected as party first secretary, replacing Fidel. José Ramon Machado, an 80-year-old Stalinist, will remain his number two, and Ramiro Valdés, aged 78, number three. The 15-member politbureau contains only three new faces. Fidel himself made a surprise appearance at Raúl's side at the end of the Congress (see picture). The message seemed to be that change can only happen if the old guard approve.

Term limits will be discussed at a party meeting in January. It is hard not to imagine that the recent Arab uprisings against dynastic dictatorships influenced this attempt to curb the power of future leaders. And some will see the announcement as a snub to Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, the Castros' closest ally and chief benefactor, who has been in office since 1999 and is preparing to run for another six-year term in 2012.

Raúl is quietly discarding many of the revolution's founding ideas, if not yet its veteran leaders.

The Congress formally approved measures announced last September designed to rescue an economy that can no longer feed Cuba's 11m people in the face of low productivity at home and a chronic shortage of foreign exchange (only partly attributable to the American economic embargo).

Raúl again stressed that the "updating of the model" is to perfect socialism, not scrap it. State planning will remain paramount. But the market will play a much bigger role. About 1m workers are to leave public jobs and set up small businesses. The *libreta*, the ration card that has guaranteed a (dwindling) monthly food supply to every Cuban for half a century, has become "an unbearable burden for the economy and a disincentive to work," Raúl said. It will now go only to the neediest.

In small ways the Congress amplified the reforms (though that is a banned word). It approved a change allowing Cubans to buy and sell their homes, a move on which there had been some foot-dragging, and called for taxes on the new businesses to be reviewed periodically to ensure they were not too burdensome. And the delegates discussed boosting the tourist industry by allowing more foreign investment in golf courses and marinas.

In practice change is moving slowly. Less than a fifth of the planned half a million workers are reported to have been laid off by the end of March. Many fear loss of perks, and have resorted to a cumbersome appeals procedure. Of the 200,000 new small-business licences issued, some two-thirds are thought to have gone to existing, but previously clandestine, outfits. Promised credit is not yet available.

Even so, stalls selling drinks, flowers and pirate DVDs do brisk business. In the hallway of his home in Havana's crumbling old town, Evys Díaz repairs shoes, while his brother Héctor cuts hair. A neighbour runs a café out of an open window. Mr Díaz, a Brontë enthusiast who rushes upstairs to fetch a postcard of Haworth, admits that he has worked privately for several years. But taxi drivers grumble that they face more competition; some Cubans say there is less bread in the shops since private pizza-makers started buying up flour.

Though Cuba remains a communist country of one-party rule and a state media monopoly, in some ways debate is becoming freer. Under Raúl, Cubans have been allowed to buy mobile phones and computers (though they remain expensive). It is a bit easier to get access to the internet. More than 90 political prisoners have been freed since last summer.

But there are narrow limits to the relaxation. A student reports being hauled off to a police station after attending a free internet session at the United States' consular office. At a march on April 16th to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the rout of the CIA-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, several people reported being ordered by their bosses to attend.

The Castros are still revered by many older Cubans. Salvador Renova Mejías, a sprightly retired history teacher, fought "like an ant against an elephant" at the Bay of Pigs. "I knew Cuba before the triumph of the revolution. I would rather have died a thousand times than return to the past," he says. But there are many signs that younger Cubans are more restless.

If the youth are awkward politically, the elderly are an economic problem. The government has raised the retirement age for men to 65. From 2020, more people will leave the workforce each year than enter it, placing even more strain on the creaking economy. Age is creeping up on the Castros in more ways than one.

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